00164

1955/03/29

Form FS-413
Imp. Le-van-Tân - 51.916

Policy file
Smith

TELEGRAM SENT

TO : SECSTATE WASH

DATE : 29 MAR 55

No. :

CODE

CHARGED TO : Embassy

NIACT

PRIORITY

FROM COLLINS

Sent Department 4194 rptd info Paris 1118.

Refembtel 4192 rptd Paris 1117.

1. I called on Ely 1630 29 Mar to hear his account of his conversation with Diem. Ely said that Diem had finally agreed not to use force in taking over headquarters of national police and surete. Ely had offered to incorporate this building within his security zone and to secure evacuation Binh Xuyen commandos who were said to have occupied it. Ely said that Diem was eager to fire police and surete chief Sang at once and was prepared to accept Defmin Minh's resignation. Commissioner Wintrebert who was present said that brother Luyen was certainly back of this development. I told Ely that I was gravely disturbed by Diem's having taken steps of this gravity without consulting him or me.

2. Immediately after conversation with Ely I called on Diem. I told him I was disturbed by developments and asked where the situation stood at that moment. Diem replied that the director of police and surete, Sang, had been guilty of many acts of indiscipline, had permitted Binh Xuyen commandos to patrol streets and occupy police property. He added that he should have dis-

NLE Date 7-2-87

charged Sang at the outset, but had instead been patient with him. Now, however, Diem said, it was impossible for him to insure internal security. He had attempted to reach Sang by telephone, but latter had refused to talk to him. Thereupon, he had taken steps to have the police headquarters occupied by Army troops at 1330 and new chief of police and surete installed. He added that Cabinet had twice authorized him to take any steps necessary to insure security. He had called in Defmin Minh and Chief of Staff Ty and given them necessary orders. Minh told him that Cabinet should be asked to approve step of this gravity. He had replied that Sang's indiscipline was insupportable. Minh had replied to Diem that he would be obliged to resign if Primin's order was carried out. Diem told Minh that he could note in writing any objections he wished make to Primin's order but had no option but to execute it. Minh thereupon resigned. Diem then gave formal order to Chief of Staff Ty to execute occupation police headquarters. (Instead, Ty called on Ely and informed him that he would not execute order without Ely's approval. Ely apparently told him to suspend its execution.)

The Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

3. Diem then said Commissioner Wintrebert called on Primin at latter's invitation immediately after departure of Minh and Ty. Wintrebert promptly informed Ely of Diem's plan. Ely dispatched Generals Jacquot and Gambies and Commissioner Wintrebert to palace to warn President in strongest terms against execution of his order to seize police headquarters, adding that in any case he should not move until he had talked to Ely. Diem finally

agreed to suspend his orders. Meanwhile Ely sent his aide to inform me of situation.

4. Diem said that Ely had called on him at 1530 and warned him against attempting to seize police headquarters by force, saying this move could unleash serious disorders. Ely offered to undertake to remove any Binh Xuyen commandos from police headquarters. Diem said he told Ely that he was head of the Government and Interior Minister and had no choice except to move since police chief Sang was flouting his authority. He had calculated dangers and felt he could carry off coup without danger. Diem added that he felt he had to strengthen his position against sects. Ely said to Diem that there must be some other solution. Diem said he had replied that solution he proposed was correct one, even though he had agreed suspend its execution.

5. I told Diem that in my judgment if his orders had been executed and force had been used there would have been severe fighting within city. Moreover his troops would have been hard pressed to take police headquarters without artillery. Diem replied that he had studied situation carefully, that Binh Xuyen troops were young, low in morale and would have surrendered. I told Diem that no one I had consulted agreed with his analysis. Moreover, we had reports police headquarters had been mined. Additionally, troops protected by walls with machine guns sited to command approaches to building would have the advantage over attackers. Fighting could have been expected to break out in other parts of the city and this would have resulted in far

greater losses than gains. Moreover French would probably have had to intervene. Diem insisted however that he had sufficient forces available to take police headquarters. I replied that without fighting it might be possible to solve present crisis by political means. The Binh Xuyen are in defensive positions and I believe that they would not initiate action against govt.

6. With respect to Defmin Minh, I told Diem I had heard from various sources that orders had been issued to Army over Minh's head by brother Luyen. I reminded Diem I had warned him Minh might resign if he continued circumvent him. I added that I shared Minh's view of this problem. I went on to say that if Diem accepted Minh's resignation he might be confronted with situation as grave as that presented by Hinh rebellion. I said that he should not attempt take on all opposition forces at one time. I advised Diem to let French secure Binh Xuyen evacuation of police headquarters and recommended that he himself should attempt work out an arrangement with Minh whereby latter would remain in office. I told Diem that in my opinion he had succeeded in outmaneuvering sects up to the present but was now risking open strife with them. I warned him that without Minh he might not secure loyal support of Army. I added that before he took such action he should have consulted Ely and me. I said that as he knew I have supported him 100% and urged him sit down with Ely and me to work out solution to problem. Diem objected that Minh does not have same appreciation of situation as he does. I told Diem that he should have called a Cabinet meeting, as Minh recommended, and said that nothing serious would have happened during course of day if he had delayed. I told him that by acting alone he was needlessly antagonizing others and might end

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

by governing Viet Nam with help of his two brothers alone. These steps had threatened the life of the govt and were not worth the candle.

7. Diem reacted quickly to suggestion that he was governing largely with aid of his brothers, denying allegation, and saying that he had had to act before situation got worse. I told him that in fact the situation before this latest action was improved. I said if he forced the hand of the opposition by military action he would risk losing everything. I said again that he should let French peaceably remove Binh Xuyen from police headquarters, that he should consult with his Ministers and that he should request Minh to suspend his resignation. In this connection, Vietnamese army officers had besought Minh not to resign. Diem said that in last crisis he had been told the Army was for Minh, which was not true.

The Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

8. I said that Ely and I were planning to meet with Diem in day or two to suggest solutions for sect demobilization problem and that if he forced the issue now in this manner he would be making the gravest mistake of his career. I added that I was entirely out of sympathy with his actions. Diem insisted stubbornly that Minh and he do not see things in same light and that Minh must go. He himself would retain Defense portfolio and give Interior Ministry to some other minister, unnamed. I told Diem that hemust learn how to handle strong men who disagree with him since the knack of governing consists largely in that skill. I said that I would be obliged to report to my govt that he was making a serious mistake and unnecessarily threatening life of his govt.

9. I asked Diem what Cabinet changes he had in mind in letter he addressed to Gen Soai. Diem gave unsatisfactory reply indicating that he proposed doubling up ministries, using present Cabinet members.

10. Diem said that Cao Dai General Phuong was coming to see him evening 29th to ask that Diem incorporate Phuong's 8,000 men, of whom 3,000 have already been integrated, into Army. Diem indicated he intended to integrate Phuong's men so that Phuong would no longer be answerable to Cao Dai pope. When I asked how these troops would be paid, Diem said that once they had been integrated steps could be taken for the demobilization of some of their numbers.

11. I told Diem that I had made few requests of him during my tour in Viet Nam. However I was obliged to ask him to request Minh to withdraw his resignation, even if only temporarily. Diem replied that the resignation at present is in suspense. I said that Minh might not think so and that Diem risked grave dangers of Army rebellion if Minh left the govt. Diem referred in answer to Minh's "clique" as an objectionable element of the General Staff. I said once again that Diem must accustom himself to opposition.

12. In conclusion, I said that Diem was making it very difficult for me to continue supporting his govt. I said that if he continued his present course we would be under heavy pressure to support a change in the govt. If it were not for refugees, for whom we have heavy responsibility, I feared I might

have to recommend withdrawal of US support. I asked that Diem take following three steps: (a) That he attempt to gain Minh'S acceptance to remain in govt, (b) that he work out specific proposal for revamping Cabinet, to be discussed with Ely and me and (c) that he consult Ely and me before taking any additional critical steps whatsoever. Diem replied he would think over situation and might give me call later in evening.

13. After leaving Diem I called on Ely and reported above conversation. We agreed to meet with Diem if he called either of us. As of 2230 March 29 we have had no further word from Diem.

14. While nothing explosive is likely to happen unless Diem decides to use force in taking over surete headquarters, I am greatly disturbed over situation as indicated above.

The Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

KIDDER

PJSturm:JLCollins:jjg